

The Baroness Is Listening March 19

During World War II, the SIGINT services in both the United States and the United Kingdom employed thousands of women in many different occupations, some in uniform, some as civilians.

Britain employed many women as intercept operators. The Royal Air Force (RAF) needed tactical voice intercept but often was hard pressed to find enough women who were qualified in the German language. To help make up the deficiency, the WAAF (Women's Auxiliary Air Force) employed refugees from Germany or German-occupied countries who had strong language skills. It was clear that these people would not be pro-Nazi and could be counted on to keep Britain's intelligence secrets from the enemy.



(Aileen Clayton, who rose from intercept operator to supervisor of intercept operators, profiled one such person who provided key support as the war took an unexpected turn. The Baroness Rudi Eisenklam (de Sarigny) from Poland had been studying English at Cambridge when the war began (September 1939, when the German military invaded Poland). The baroness was tasked with monitoring and translating the tactical communications of German bombers operating over the UK.

On the night of June 22, 1941, the baroness was in the watchroom at the air base at Kingsdown, “copying” German bombers as they undertook missions over the British Isles.

As the German raid ended, and the bombers headed back to the continent, the baroness, as the junior person on duty, was sent to the cookhouse to bring back

coffee and sandwiches (“cookhouse” is pronounced “coogus;” Americans would call the “cookhouse” a “mess hall.”)

As she returned with the provisions, she found the others in the watchroom in “feverish” activity. They were listening to considerable German bomber and fighter operations, but not across the English Channel and with different patterns than they were used to --- these turned out to be communications from Poland. The Germans, by Hitler’s order, were invading the Soviet Union, and, thanks to an atmospheric “skip,” some of the communications were audible at the British eavesdropping stations!

Aileen Clayton later asked the baroness to write down her recollections of that extraordinary night. The baroness recalled, “Once we got the first place name spelled in clear, I realized that the traffic was coming from south-east Poland, an area of which I had a fair knowledge since I was born and brought up there.” The only reference map of the area was a small school atlas without much detail, so the baroness’s knowledge of local villages and other landmarks was invaluable in making sense of the aircraft communications. “A small town of Kolomyja was mentioned, too. I remember it particularly well, since I had an aunt living there.”

The Kingsdown facility was able to provide inside news of the invasion to UK authorities, with a wealth of detail not available from any other source.

German forces quickly advanced so far into the Soviet Union that their communications could no longer be heard. The baroness got her 33 hours off, and visited Cambridge, “where I used to find peace and tranquility.” She concluded her short memoir by writing, “Hitler’s gamble did not come off and because of his Russian invasion, he lost the war, whilst I lost my family and my country.”

SOURCE: Aileen Clayton, *The Enemy is Listening* (London: Hutchinson, 1980)

508 captions: A young lady with a headscarf, apparently getting into a light aircraft.